



Participant Comments on Their Experiences during “Opening the Book of Nature” Events

This is a real first step toward recovering the Christian testimony of God’s presence through the world which He made, and thus for recovering our priestly responsibility for it.

Fr. Benjamin Teitelbaum
Boston, Massachusetts

This Opening the Book of Nature program was a life altering experience. The warmth of God’s hands on my heart has forever changed my life.

Sue Peletier
Saint Paul, Minnesota

No one else anywhere is doing anything like this, which reveals a huge gap in today’s Christian formation and spirituality.

Ann Alexander
New York, New York

You will learn to appreciate the Creator in the “art museum” of a wilderness experience. Trade in the comforts of home for an invigorating home in the woods.

Rev. David Woods,
Plymton, Massachusetts

This is a worthwhile experience which facilitates a deeper awareness and understanding of our spirituality and how it is directly tied into creation.

Julie Thompson,
Temple City, California

The Lord has much to teach us through His creation and this is a great starting place. The lessons learned are not optional to my faith.

Don Wallace,
Aurora, Colorado

This event put into words things I already intuited. What a comfort to know that these things are true!

Dorothy Wolf
Alto, Michigan

Be prepared to plunge deep into the assumptions about Christianity which you have taken only superficially. Jesus Christ came alive in the wilderness like I never expected.

Gloria Dondero
Reno, Nevada

During one of the times of solitude in the woods, I felt a deep sense of how each of the entities in nature was serving me — the trees, plants, air, water, etc. Did I have gratitude? And how was I respecting that service? I think I got a glimpse of what Francis of Assisi knew so well.

Allen Johnson,
Dunmore, West Virginia

Thank you for putting this weekend program together. I have learned so much in a 48 hour period, I don’t know even if a lifetime will be long enough to apply it all.

Ruth Bowen
St. Louis, Missouri

Opening the Book of Nature is a rich opportunity to exit the confines of the house “box,” the work “box,” the car “box,” the school “box,” and enter the beauty of God’s world, where His eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen.

Angela Kantola
Indian Hills, Colorado

“Opening the Book of Nature” is much more than a weekend exploration of the numinous in nature. It is a powerful vehicle through which God is renewing his Church in Christ.

Fr. David R. Green
Charleston, West Virginia

This program is so basic to living and breathing that it’s radical. We don’t live the basics of life enough. This introduces you to how to see again, feel again, breathe again, and trust again at the “ground” level.

Rev. Tamara Walker
Kansas City, Missouri

The Book of Nature is one of the primary texts of the Christian spiritual walk. If you’ve not yet opened it, you’ve not yet come very far. You’re not yet awakened to the full splendor of God.

Mike Kraftson-Hogue
Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire

It is a renewal experience that serves to kindle our fire for creation and its Cause, and that will then help us to inspire others.

Dr. Robert McDougal, MD
Kalamazoo, Michigan

God speaks through his creation, and this weekend provided me with an opportunity to listen to His message. I came away feeling renewed and more enthusiastic about my responsibility to “tend and keep the garden” (Genesis 2:15).

Sarah Beekie
Saint Paul, Minnesota

It is truly a blessing to be brought together with a group of people who love nature and people, and you’re learning and enjoying God’s gift of nature all at the same time. It is hard to leave that special loving environment and go home. The message is to take it home and spread the word and walk the talk.

Normalee Martin
Leesburg, Virginia

I’ve always known the wilderness was important to me. This experience helped me understand why. Through my own meditation and the thoughts shared by others, it was a worship experience that surpasses any that I have known.

Brenda Bratton
Weymouth, Massachusetts

This is a wonderful opportunity to experience nature and explore our privileges and responsibilities to creation with a diverse group of believers in a glorious setting.

Thea Wilshire,
Glendora, California

This program helped me to learn to hear God’s voice and to trust Him. It made me appreciate nature on a deeper level than previously.

Matt Tumulty
Portland, Oregon

The weekend opened my eyes to God’s creation in a new and exciting way. I came away with a sense of hope for the future of creation.

Dr. Bob Marshall
Kenna, West Virginia

This is an inspiring, multi-faceted way for Christians to strengthen the bonds between ourselves and creation, and between creation and our Christian faith.

Jenneke Barton
Washington, DC

Here is a program to recharge you and inspire you — to experience and to rejoice in the beauty of God’s creation.

Tikhon Suresh Pichai
Simpsonville, South Carolina

This program was unique in my prayer life and religious experience. The opportunity to pray with others who were looking for a deeper understanding of God’s presence in His creation was a precious opportunity indeed.

Maryellen O’Farrell
Charleston, West Virginia

It's difficult for me to express just how valuable the weekend in the Berkshires was! I have struggled with the idea that seeking God's teaching through nature is perhaps a pagan or non-Christian act. But I've found that experiencing and feeling God through creation has helped me to develop a deeper relationship with Him and all which inhabit this world. This program helped me to see that "Opening the Book of Nature" is necessary and valuable for Christians today.

Cheryl Johnston
Wilmington, Delaware

Long ago, Job was challenged to "stop and consider God's wonders" (Job 37:14). During the week at Yosemite I received that same challenge. I opened the Book of Nature. There were hikes through fields of mountain wildflowers, times of gazing into the star-filled skies, evenings of sitting around a campfire — I had done all this many times before. The value of this program was the intentionality of the effort to focus the group on God's creation and our response to it.

Dr. Gary Fawver
Newberg, Oregon

The OBN wilderness pilgrimage and other OBN programs that I participated in, have helped me to open my heart and mind to the presence of the living God deep within creation and to discover a profound joy and peace.

Fr. Jacek Orzechowski, OFM
Durham, North Carolina

Opening the Book of Nature is a way to begin to tie Christian Scripture to one's experience in nature – to see how they are complimentary and how reflecting on Scripture while in a natural setting can help one draw deeper into the mysteries of God's creation and being a creature who is listening to God's Word in all.

Marybeth Lorbiecki
Hudson, Wisconsin

The value of "Opening the Book of Nature" is many faceted, like a jewel. One facet is the communion with others in the body of Christ and feeling as kindred spirits -- they understand! Another facet is a heart-felt gratitude for God's many diverse creatures, both floral and fauna as well as stars and rocks; in short "All Things Bright and beautiful." A third facet is gratitude for our amazing senses of sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste by which we learn of God's creation as well as intuition by which to discern spiritual dimensions to creation.

Elizabeth Parnell
Utica, New York

My appreciation for God speaking through the natural world grew by leaps and bounds. When you reach this point of realization, you think more reverently about the natural world and appreciate it more deeply.

Marty Cowell,
Portland, Oregon

What a wonderful program! I was reminded of the sanctuary found in nature. Sometimes I get the fragrance of that sanctity when I am out for a walk in town, or on a hike with my family, but to really slow down in nature is to "Be still, and know that I am the Lord." It is soul-renewing.

Acacia McCombs
Santa Fe, New Mexico

The privilege of living in creation requires reverence for the relationship.

Bob Harrison
Portland, Oregon

During my weekend at the "Opening of the Book of Nature" program, I experienced in a very deep way the presence and the love of our Creator for me as I enjoyed a weekend in nature with the other participants. It was life changing for me. I will always remember our shared thoughts about leaves, and trees. The sun and hawks will never be the same for me.

Alison Lang
Centerville, Ohio

This Opening the Book of Nature program was a life altering experience. The warmth of God's hands on my heart has forever changed my life.

Sue Peletier
Saint Paul, Minnesota

This retreat is like a Bible study of nature. The Opening the Book of Nature event was an answer to my prayers, where people can come and rejoice in creation.

Daniel Solomon
Rockville, Maryland

Come away, come away to the outdoors and be refreshed with God's love through all creatures, great and small, and others who share that love. Joy results, and from action, motivation for further action.

Sue Konopka
Asheville, North Carolina

Opening the Book of God's creation brings us into awareness of the Holy Spirit and thus an instant church of believers who share kinship with creation and our brethren. We somehow come together in compassion and in our looking to God through the icon of His creation. This brings fresh inspiration about our faith, a sense of divine providence, the Trinity, salvation, hope, etc. We are transformed by this event and our faith deepens through what we learn.

Tom Herschelman
Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin

This spiritual experience cannot be described in words. The lessons and love of God go straight to the soul. You leave changed, looking at and living in creation in a different way.

Jack Pierce
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Here is a great foundation for the journey of discovering God at a deeper level through His spoken Word in His creation.

Judy Philips
Bozeman, Montana

This weekend can open your eyes to the long, rich history of care for creation that is too often overlooked in our Christian traditions.

Paul Bartels
Asheville, NC

Creation rejoiced and God smiled down upon us. It was a truly joyful weekend!

Victoria Masotta
Haverhill, Massachusetts

The trust and safety, acceptance created in the group allowed so much awareness, depth, and growth to occur. Thank you!

Lucy Wood
Spotswood, Pennsylvania

The Book of Nature weekend program helped open a long closed book of learning about God and the things of God through His Creation.

Tim Stevens
Livingston, Montana

Our time in nature meant so much to me. I believe that this is one of the most important of all Christian works, especially in our own confused times where our lack of realization and abandonment of the living tradition, as expressed by the Fathers, has left this area open to pagan speculation and worse. And, as environmental conditions steadily worsen, it becomes even more critical that we be able to hear Christ's voice and direction speaking to us through His creation. I know that serious questions of discernment arise for the Orthodox Christian in this exploration and I am eager to learn more about approaching this in the context of the virtues and humble Christian discipleship – areas which our regrettably short period of time together did not allow us to cover in any depth.

Stephani Colby
Boston, Massachusetts

I'm not sure what to say. The current testimonies seem almost too sensational, but I can understand how they are all true. Maybe the changed attitudes in participants caused by the weekend might be more valuable for promotional literature?

Bob Jurick
Fairborn, Ohio

This was an invaluable exploration into a beautiful piece of creation. I will always remember it and am hoping for more exploration opportunities next year.

Martha Pierce,
Chattanooga, Tennessee

The seminar was very valuable. It helped me to see God's creation and God in new ways.

Mark McReynolds
Scotts Valley, California

The weekend program created space for the Holy Spirit to announce its presence in each of us individually and in the synergy of the group. A wonderful experience.

Anne Garriazo
Bowie, Maryland

This is an issue which has become subverted by secularists who ironically are not as well equipped as Christians to understand the horrible consequences of abusing what God gives to us.

Bob Fetterly
Kalama, Washington

This is different from any other church program that I have ever attended. It is a unique and authentic Christian experience.

Kevin Weaver,
Reinholds, Pennsylvania

Experience in nature is often overlooked as a way to secure a better relationship with God. This Opening the Book of Nature event helped me to explore this relationship.

Matt Jones
Sacramento, California

Opening the Book of Nature is surely an event that those looking to deepen their experience of faith and ecology should explore.

Suse Greenstone
Leesburg, Virginia

"Opening the Book of Nature" offers guidance into a greater understanding of the awesome handiwork of our Lord and Saviour.

John Mower
San Diego, California

Although it can be difficult for Americans raised in a materialist and secular culture with its emphases on either a sentimental or brutally utilitarian approach to nature to penetrate through the anesthetizing fog of our conditioning to a true and living relationship to our Lord and His creation,

name lost
Placerville, California

It is a must for church leaders and lay persons to learn about the 11th Commandment.

Mike Wolf
Alto, Michigan

The program is great therapy for contemporary Christians. God spoke to me and my ears and eyes were opened.

Mike Lampen
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Orthodox Commentaries from past OBN programs

I was surprised at the power of the exercises in nature. How amazing to find God so very present in His creation, when I but take a few moments to meet Him there! That is a gift which I hope to continue to practice on my own.

I noticed what an impact it had on our teens to be a part of the circle, sharing and being listened to in the midst of the group, taking time to "unplug" and notice their surroundings, pursuing a still place. I think this made a real impact on each of them, and we are talking about how to continue meeting throughout the year, if even on a quarterly basis.

Thanks again for your time, patience, and service,
with Gratitude in Christ,
Juliana
Santa Fe, NM

Two of the teens wrote their comments on paper to me. One wrote: "I liked it a lot and learned new things." The other says "I really enjoyed my time doing this. It was like being in church outside."

I'm sorry if that's not too helpful, but they were definitely sincere. John, the quiet boy who didn't have much to say, actually seemed to get a lot out of it, but just couldn't find the words. They were actually much more talkative at night than during the day.

Madeleine told me verbally Sunday that the process was "very healing" to her. I'm working on getting her to write it down though.

Got another response from a teen for you: "Christ in the Wilderness made me realize I don't need electronics. My friends sometimes get lost in videos. They don't understand that we get a lot of stuff but take it for granted."

Ashley Zappe
Santa Fe, NM

I stepped into the OBN process and it was amazing because it put me into an ascetic state of mind. It then opened me to the phenomenal beauty of God's creation. I was able to see that creation does God's will completely. That in turn led me into a state of repentance that I seldom find so acutely in my daily life in the city. The result was that I was quickened in my spiritual striving far beyond my normal daily push.

I saw how wilderness strips us of our city idols. We had no TV, no cell phones, no city conveniences. These become distractions to the spiritual life. Because people had to leave these city 'idols' at home, they were freed up for the spiritual challenge before us. I saw too that the more complex our lives, the less able we are to remember the presence of God.

Fr. James Robinson,
Saint Mark of Ephesus parish (OCA)
Kingston, Massachusetts,

This was one of the most valuable experiences in my entire life! I enjoyed all of the people. The program developed a wonderful sense of rapport with one another. I came for a holy experience of God and that happened far beyond my expectations.

There was also great joy in the program.... I felt a profound healing take place – a healing I didn't even know that I needed. I found a tremendous deepening of my awareness of the depth of the spiritual journey that came from this effort to read the Book of Nature, that we need this to help us understand the Book of Tradition.

The design of the program was wonderful.... The content was rich, the program progressed logically on a solid foundation in the Scriptures and saints. It led upwards to higher and higher experiences. At times I felt as though angels and saints were with me.

Dr. Heather Devich
Saint Sava Serbian Church
Phoenix, Arizona

In the past I considered my love of nature as separate from my spiritual life. I learned that experience in nature is not separate. With a right attitude, it becomes an integral part of one's spiritual life. The lessons in wilderness seemed natural, gentle, yet profound. My worldview expanded in many unexpected ways.

“The trees, the rocks, the stars, all of wild nature, all stood in their own right and glory. Never before did I hear nature proclaiming so loudly, “I am God's Creation.”

We were given a wonderful opportunity, the impact of which we are *still* processing, and the lasting gifts of which still expand our hearts with thankfulness and gratitude....”

“After a few days I observed my heart opening to everything around me. Imagine living and walking in beauty for days, absorbing it and becoming saturated with it. Beauty works on you; God works on you. You almost see His face in the beauty around you. I felt closer to God, closer to my soul, closer to every living thing I passed. Even the animals now seemed undisturbed by my presence.

“My heart relaxed in ways that I did not know were possible as it grew in trust in God, in easy acceptance of life, in joy, and spontaneity. It looked like God began dissolving all the knots in my thinking. During one of the solitary walks I caught myself in a state of total peace and joy. I had no worry in the world (and I did run my mind through the list of things which usually disturb me in case I was in a state of blissful denial). In this setting all the “problems” seemed real, but now insignificant, insubstantial on the scale of things, to be managed perhaps, but not worth losing peace over. Filled with this peace that I knew my mind could not possibly produce by itself, I asked myself in disbelief, “Can life be this beautiful?”

“During the following days I practiced turning to God constantly, something I easily forget in my daily life. I learned how to address everything with prayer and how to quietly bless places and people. We faced our inner challenges. This was far more than a camping trip; this was indeed a pilgrimage. Everything presented an opportunity to learn, change, love and grow closer to God.”

“With experiences like this, we began to understand more clearly the lessons wilderness gives to us when joined with prayer and spiritual striving. As we learned how to prime our

attention with prayer, silence, gratitude and love, the wilderness began to unfold its essence. It showed its harmonious duality; complexity and simplicity, vibrant life and all present decay, breathtaking grandeur and humbling beauty of the smallest things.”

Ms. Anna Bogna Wawrzeniuk
Saint Michael’s Russian Orthodox Church (ROCOR),
Patterson, NJ

I mistakenly thought that my experience in Yosemite would end after I drove away. But, when one enters into the glory of God’s creation, something else entirely happens. Indeed it is a blessing; a stretch of the mind, an opening of the heart, a shifting of the soul toward the divine. When we turn to walk in the way of the Lord, in the midst of His creation, we feel created ourselves and in so being more a part of everything.”

It takes strength and courage to walk such a path.... Ultimately it takes a willingness to surrender to the will of God and for a short time to be as the desert fathers were, subject to the glory of Divine creation and made painfully aware of our need for humility and awakened by the inexplicable joy of knowing that ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son for the salvation of our souls.’

This was not just a walk through the park. It was a spiritual trek that offers a look at the complete self through an unfiltered divine lens. Both the best and worst [in one’s self] is seen. The challenge is reckoning with what you see in humility, forgiveness, and love. The opportunity exists through this wilderness program to become a truer self and to experience joy as a child of God amidst His vast and endless beauty from the tiniest flower to the majestic, tallest tree. It is a chance to feel the pulse of all creation; the bees, deer, birds, squirrels, lizards, bears, the rivers rushing and the thundering water-falls, and the peaceful sweetness of the deep woods. Here you can hear the rocks cry out and the trees clapping their hands ‘praise and glory be to God the giver of all good!’”

Ms. Gina Margitich,
Boston, Massachusetts

The best thing about the Christ in the Wilderness Program was the fellowship with everyone.

While seeking to find the presence of Christ, our small group was filled with great joy.

We were given writings from the Holy Desert Fathers and other wise men to contemplate and discuss each day while walking through the beauty and marvels of God’s creation.

The whole week was dedicated to petition the Lord by our prayers and actions to come and abide in us and cleanse us of all impurity and save our souls (from Psalm 51).

When I returned home to Atlanta at the end of the week I felt I had experienced something very important for my spiritual life; my heart now seeks to be filled with the peace from above which is the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ and I should not let myself be weighed down with the cares of the world.

Joseph Vance
Atlanta, Georgia

Thank you for pioneering this much-needed ministry. Although it can be difficult for Americans raised in a materialist and secular culture with its emphases on either a sentimental or brutally utilitarian approach to nature to penetrate through the anesthetizing fog of our conditioning to a true and living relationship to our Lord and His creation, I believe that this is one of the most important of all Christian works, especially in our own confused times where our lack of realization and abandonment of the living tradition, as expressed by the Fathers, has left this area open to pagan speculation and worse.

As environmental conditions steadily worsen, it becomes even more critical that we be able to hear Christ's voice and direction speaking to us through His creation. I know that serious questions of discernment arise for the Orthodox Christian in this exploration and I am eager to learn more about approaching this in the context of the virtues and humble Christian discipleship – areas which our regrettably short period of time together did not allow us to cover in any depth.

In my recent experience as an apprentice to two clinical herbalists, I have been both overjoyed by what I have been learning of God's providence as expressed in the marvelous plants and saddened by the misunderstandings that they have of the role of Christianity in relation to the environment. The people with whom I work have little reason to have other than a negative impression as Christians have been largely absent in this critically important area. Although my colleagues have listened with respect and even interest to my barely adequate attempts to present a relevant Christian paradigm, I think that programs such as "Opening the Book of Nature" can be powerful instruments for awakening Christians to a right relationship to God in His creation and in bringing non-Christians into the "good news" in a most tangible and accessible way.

I hope that we will be able to work out at least one or two more extensive programs for you in the Northeast. Please let me know how I can help. You and these fine programs are in my prayers.

D. Stephani Colby
Newton, Massachusetts

In May, 2007 the Greek Orthodox Church of the Hamptons enjoyed an introductory version of the Christ in the Wilderness program.

The program is a rediscovery of the Orthodox practice of learning spiritual lessons from nature. The process involved periods of prayer and reflection alternated with group process to produce a blend of instruction, personal experience and group discussion. Each person related the personal insights he or she made out in the woods to others and we learned from each other's experiences.

This process evoked a method for garnering lessons from creation. As the program progressed, the centrality of Jesus Christ in participants' lives became apparent. Some participants were moved to tears and opened up in a manner of confession and related deep feelings about their lives in relationship to Christ.

The event began with an evening presentation on the historical potential to learn from creation. The next day involved a trip to a nature preserve where the participants found a deeper understanding of Christ's connections to the environment.

The parish has subsequently undertaken the task of revising its Sunday school program to include the methods of spiritual discernment used during the weekend.

Paul Maus
Long Island, New York

What the Church Fathers say about the “book of nature” is startling to me. Some of the greatest Fathers give rich food for thought. An important connection was made for me between the Church and God’s creation. The earth and its beauty reveal qualities of God that are meant to bring us into communion with Him. My love for the wilderness can be an aid to my spiritual life, prompted by the spiritual knowledge of the Fathers. These Fathers certainly did not consider their love for nature, the wilderness, whatever we call it, as an isolated experience from the rest of their Orthodox Christian life.

When we allow our self to open up and become comfortable in a place where nature reigns– a forest, along a creek or river, an open field of sky and land, or wild wilderness – our inner being is touched and we are drawn into humbleness and thanksgiving before the Creator of both us and nature. God enfolds us through nature and encourages us to go within and reach up to Him in prayer and worship.

Fr. Athanasius Thomas Malachi Shaw
Olympia, Washington

It is through contemplating creation that we encounter the great Artist. It is not through imagination of the mind, writings of scholars, or hearing the words of gifted orators alone that we truly find God, but through the experience of the soul being touched by a direct interaction with the Divine. It is through contemplation of the natural world and its order that we see God's interaction with the earth and his love for humanity. It is impossible to experience the beauty of creation and not feel flooded with the love of God and the grace which flows through the cracks of brokenness.

In the week we shared together, our interconnectedness with *each other* was also made clear and how mysteriously our healing is intertwined as we cared, served, and supported our little community. Perhaps it was something of a taste of the Kingdom of God.

Through the Christ in the Wilderness program, we were given a therapeutic space and community to nurture this experience of creation, humanity, and God. Christ in the Wilderness should be an annual prescription for the spiritual health of every Christian!

Let's continue to build this “community of the spirit,” as Bob put it, whether it be for planning our next time coming together or the future development of sharing life together.

Jennifer Ferraez
Cottage Grove, Oregon

At the end of May, 2005, a group of Orthodox Christians met at Silver Springs Campsite near Mount Rainier for an Introduction to the Christ in the Wilderness program, more commonly known as “the Book of Nature.” I was familiar by osmosis with the program because my husband and daughter attended last year’s ten day program in California, but I wasn’t sure what to expect from this two-day event attended by clergy, lay members, teenagers, and catechumens from different jurisdictions in the Seattle area.

Folks rolled into the campground about 4:30 pm Friday and, being the cook, I was delighted to see that from the beginning, folks were mingling nicely.... An icon of Christ hung on a mammoth fir tree, billowy smoke lingered in the air above, and dinner had begun. It was like a big family meal, nestled in the forest.

After dinner Fr. Athanasius gathered everyone to introduce the concept of the Book of Nature. Without saying it, it was evident that there is an element of mystery in this concept, something to be yearned for, to be gained. He began to read excerpts about the Book of Nature from the Church Fathers, the Gospels, and famous writers. That night we were simply introduced to the possibility of learning through God’s creation. I hadn’t realized that the term *Book of Nature* was used often by the Church Fathers or that this is part of Orthodox history.

The next day we came together with the opening question of “How do we learn from Nature?” Hearing more inspiring quotes we were given the assignment to go out into nature and reflect on this question. Some sat by the rolling river, others near the trees, some wrote, some repeated the Jesus prayer, some sat in the campground while others hiked around.

What was most interesting is how the contemplation afterward brought forth quite profound revelations. Some shared struggles, some inspirations, some reflections from their conscience, but what incredible discussions! We did this several times during the day and each time, it seemed like we were as a group, going deeper. The fellowship went from friendly to real brotherhood in Christ. It was surprising that through this setting, men and women who had just been introduced on Friday were sharing intimately on Saturday. We were dwelling in unity.

Unfortunately, we were caught by surprise that our Book of Nature excursion came to an end too quickly and we felt that our time together was far too short. What did I gain? The word that kept coming to me is “a bridge” — God’s creation is a bridge to eternal life and yet it wasn’t something individual.

We experienced this mystical Book of Nature together! Somehow in this simple format, a bridge was built into fellowship. This is not the simple fellowship that might be shared during coffee hour at a local parish, but there was something about the peacefulness of the environment, the shared essence of Orthodox Christians coming together, brethren contemplating God’s world of nature and the lovable acceptance everyone wore on their faces, that this bridge of unity was built. To me, it was completely satisfying.

Mat. Anna (Molly) Shaw
Mount Rainier, Washington

In May, 2007 the Greek Orthodox Church of the Hamptons enjoyed an introductory version of the Christ in the Wilderness program.

The program is a rediscovery of the Orthodox Christian practice of learning spiritual lessons from nature. The process involved periods of prayer and reflection alternated with group process to produce a blend of low-key instruction, personal experience and group discussion. Each person related the personal insights he or she made out in the woods to others and we learned from one another's experiences.

This process evoked a means of garnering lessons from creation. As the program progressed, the centrality of Jesus Christ in participants' lives became more apparent. Some participants were moved to tears and opened up in a manner of confession and related deep feelings about their lives in relationship to Christ.

The event began with an evening presentation on the historical potential to learn from creation. The next day involved a trip to a nature preserve where the participants found a deeper understanding of Christ's connections to the environment.

The parish has subsequently undertaken the task of revising its Sunday school program to include the methodologies of spiritual discernment used during the weekend.

Paul Maus
Mattituck, NY

I learned how God is one with the earth and all we need to know can be seen and heard in the beauty of the earth. I learned to appreciate the gifts from God and the ability to seek them out.

Christine Vamuaketes
Long Island, NY

The Christ in the Wilderness program was very thought provoking and beneficial to my life as an Orthodox Christian. I really enjoy learning about the depth of teachings that the Orthodox Church has for the environment as I am pursuing a career in environmental sciences. These teachings really should be promoted more widely in the Orthodox Church.

Constantine Rountos
Danbury, Connecticut

This program opened my eyes and ears to the beauty of nature. It encouraged deep thought about how we can live in harmony with the environment. I saw how in nature beauty and danger sometimes go together. From this I have resolved to try harder to keep the earth clean and green, to be more thankful and appreciative about the environment that we live in here in the Hamptons. In comparison of nature to things that are manmade, we pale in comparison.

Dimitrios Hatgistavrou
Southampton, NY

The nature lessons in this program were very interesting. It showed me ways to incorporate this into Sunday school. It reminded me about the importance of nature and how to respect and revere it.

Maria Kaputhakis
Sunday School teacher

Very interesting and very inspiring. This activity reinforces what I always believed about God and nature to be connected. I would have liked for it to have been a little longer and I would be very grateful if you could come back soon as we can do a more intense session.

Gus Korpet...
Parish member, No town listed

The Christ in the Wilderness program led me to reevaluate my surroundings. To take the time to respect and protect all that God has given us from the majestic trees to the lowly moss underfoot! It was time well spent in reflections of God's creations and to contemplate what we must do to protect everything he has given us and preserve all its treasures for the generations to come.

George Dimitrios
Long Island, NY

Today's walk was very enlightening on how close we are to God's creation and how we easily get caught up in our busy lives. We need to appreciate every day, every minute, in God's creation. Walk closer to God. God and nature are so connected from the roots of the trees to their tops blowing in the wind, and the leaves in the sun.

Parish member, No name given

The Christ in the Wilderness program, though brief, was a simple metaphor for understanding Christ through nature in a way that catches you unaware. This was a thought provoking exercise that can be easily applied to life and spiritual development.

Paul Maus
Mattituck, NY

Official letter from the Long Island parish president, written two weeks later:

"Your visit to our parish has stirred a desire among our members to seek additional understanding and growth in the lessons that nature can teach us about Christ and our relation to God's creation. The Christ in the Wilderness program... provided members of our community with a glimmer of how the fathers of the Church discerned lessons from the wilderness in a practical and moving manner."

Dimitrios Hatgistavrou
Southampton, NY

My Night on the Mountaintop

Poem Written during
an OBN weekend program
New Town, North Carolina

*In the still of the woods,
Beneath branches dancing in the wind,
I shook with cold
In the shadows of the night.*

*Bathed in darkness
Yet washed by the light of the moon,
God's will for me came rushing with the wind
And landed on my heart.*

*The simple words of a friend,
"You see Jesus here,"
Blew down the walls in my life
As my purpose became clear.*

*My past and my future came crashing together
In that moment on the mountaintop;
I felt a peace and a oneness
That only God can give.*

*Exhausted and sleepless,
I lay in my tent on God's chest,
My heart at least beating with His rhythm,
Pondering my new future with joy and peace.*

Celia Adams
Anapolis, Maryland